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ABSTRACT

Ideological tensions at the heart of conflicting philosophies concerning the role of English department studies in higher education generate such questions as: "Should courses in literature be required?" and "Is the ultimate goal of the English major a good job or a good karma?" The answers to these questions are important, as they concern the acceptance and expansion of writing programs within English departments. A 1993 survey of undergraduate writing programs from 264 four-year colleges and universities revealed a variety of positions. In some places those advocating utilitarian approaches have maintained sway, occasionally being motivated by political pressure. In some cases an increased emphasis on writing has become a matter of survival. Frequently, composition offerings have been allowed to be expanded only if they were not expanded at the expense of the literature program. As English departments have reacted to change in undergraduate writing programs, occasionally the dichotomy of literature versus composition is giving way to a synthesis of writing and reading as mutually supportive activities intended not merely to refine human sensibility but to enable and empower students in the academy and beyond. The challenge those persons in higher education face is not simply to replace the old hegemony of literature with a new hegemony of composition, but to construct a new English department where reading and writing are mutually valued and mutually supportive activities. (NH)

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David W. Chapman

Composition and Culture: Reforming the English Department

ED 362 869

Abstract

Traditionally, the mention of a "writing program" in an English Department almost always brought to mind freshmen-level courses. However, the professionalization of writing teachers, the development of writing-across-the-curriculum programs, a growing demand for highly literate individuals in the workplace, and many other factors have led to advanced courses in writing and rhetoric within English Departments. But these curricular changes have also resulted in changes in the culture of the English Department. They have raised new, and sometimes disturbing, questions about the focus of the English major, the recruitment and tenure of faculty, and the future direction of English studies.

Many faculty acculturated in the Arnoldian view of high culture fear that the expansion of composition programs will provoke a new philistinism in the English Department. Courses in business writing or technical writing are particularly inclined to be viewed as contrary to the mission of *humanitas* in the English Department. On the other hand, faculty trained in the latest critical theories may readily align themselves with the composition faculty because they share a common interest in non-canonical literature, in the social dimensions of writing, and in the writing of women and minorities.

Although various reconciliations of the composition/literature schism have been suggested (Ong, Hirsch, Kaufer and Young), many depend on a notion of writing as an initiation into high culture. For instance, an appeal to the historical connection between rhetoric and literature often promotes the valorizing of canonical texts. Similarly, the notion that writing is in itself a liberal art can lead to the privileging of expressive modes of discourse. A genuine reconciliation of the competing claims of composition and literature specialists cannot be attempted within the parameters of the Arnoldian ideal of liberal culture, but requires a fundamental reassessment of the cultural values of the English Department.

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Composition and Culture: Reforming the English Department

Most writing programs are built on the premise that it is important for students to write well, that writing ability is one of the hallmarks of a person with a college education. This is a view that tends to be widely accepted both within academe and with the public-at-large. Given the fragmented nature of our society and the pluralism of the modern academy, those working with such a ready-made consensus would seem to find themselves in an unusually fortunate position. One example of this consensus is in the freshman composition requirement. In the fall of 1993 Jeanette Harris, Christine Hult, and myself collected surveys of undergraduate writing programs from 264 four-year colleges and universities. Eight out of ten of these schools still have a university-wide requirement in writing. [Fourteen percent of these schools require *three* or more courses in composition for all of their students.]

Yet our survey revealed that many composition scholars, and the programs they administer, are embattled within the English departments where they reside. The comments made by this writing program administrator at a large land-grant university are typical:

> Our department has reacted and will continue to react with hostility toward new and existing courses in writing and rhetoric, especially courses in technical and professional writing. Most of the faculty here view English as the study of literature only and believe that writing is a

> non-, if not anti-, humanistic activity. Opposition to writing has often been fierce. However, for a bit of historical perspective, the conflict between the liberal arts and the sciences began at [our university] back in the 1880s. What might be most disturbing to certain faculty members is that the conflict now manifests itself within the English department.

Traditionally, the English department has been considered the vanguard of literacy in the academy, and it would seem, to many, a logical place to house programs designed to foster advanced student literacies. In my work with writing across the curriculum, I have often found colleagues in other disciplines surprised at the tension that exists between literature and composition specialists. For them, we represent a common front, a kind of Maginot Line against the Huns of cultural illiteracy, illogical thinking, and incompetent composition.

What has gone unnoticed here is that literary studies have been, and to some degree, must remain an essentially conservative discipline. Again, my colleagues in other disciplines would probably shake their heads to hear the English Department described as conservative in any way. But the conservatism of the English Department expresses itself in two ways:

First, literary studies are dedicated to preserving a set of "classical" literary texts. Of course, we are all aware of the difficulties of determining a canon of literary masterpieces based on some kind of objective, critical basis. It is difficult to measure the achievement of, say, Milton and Cummings by the same critical yardstick. In place of such an objective measure, we have historical precedent. How often have we heard a traditional curriculum defended with arguments such as these:

"It is vital for students to have a background in medieval literature."

"Students need a broad exposure to all the literary periods."

"One simply can't call oneself an educated person without knowing Spenser."

It has become increasingly difficult, however, to defend the study of literature on these lines. Someone, usually a student, is bound to ask the question, "Why are we studying all this stuff?" The answer, "Because we always have," seems to beg the question, so we say, "Because these works are classics," which may mean virtually the same thing.

Literary study is also inevitably conservative because it is based on a widely shared belief in the ennobling effects of literary study. The position of literary study in modern society was first articulated in that, you will forgive me, *classic* essay of Matthew Arnold's entitled "Sweetness and Light." Arnold sees literature as a defense against the mechanization of the industrialized society:

> Faith in machinery, is . . . our besetting danger: often in machinery most absurdly disproportioned to the end which this machinery, if it is to do any good at all, is to serve; but always in machinery, as if it had a value in and for itself. What is freedom but machinery? what is population but machinery? what is coal but machinery? what are railroads but machinery? what is wealth but machinery? what are, even, religious organisations but machinery? (Buckler, 462)

In contrast to these dehumanizing elements of industrialization, Arnold posits the timeless value of culture. Culture provides moral guidance and direction in a confused world:

> The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness and light, works to make reason and the will of God prevail. He who works for machinery, he who works for

> hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater—the passion for making them *prevail*. It is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light. (475)

This mission of "sweetness and light" that Arnold describes with evangelistic fervor is one still central to most English departments. Students are not simply to be taught, but converted; those "raw and unkindled masses of humanity," are to become uplifted and ennobled by literary study.

If the identity of the English department rests upon these foundations, the preservation of canonical texts and the pursuit of sweetness and light, it is not surprising that the department has increasingly been the subject of critique at this historical juncture. The specter of mechanization that Arnold raises is simply less apocalyptic to us in the twentieth century than it was to his contemporaries in the nineteenth. Hunger, poverty, disease—these are seen as the real enemies, not mechanization. In fact, science and technology are frequently considered the greatest hope in dealing with our problems. After all, which is the more dehumanized society, twenty ditch-diggers working in a trench or one person operating a backhoe? Or closer to home, is it a professor correcting drafts of an article on a word processor or the same professor handing a handwritten manuscript over to a poorly paid assistant who must produce draft after draft on a typewriter? Although technology may not be seen as the savior of mankind neither is it quite the Frankenstein that Arnold suggests.

Of course, Arnold's attack on machinery extends beyond railroads and textile looms (although the criticism of these inventions was more than symbolic). He is concerned with the general trend toward dehumanization in an industrial civilization. The "tyrannical machines" that Lynne Cheney attacked in her highly publicized critique of educational institutions indicates that Arnold's fears about mechanization still strike a sympathetic chord with humanists today.

However, the general public may be less willing to accept Arnold's hypothesis that the appreciation of cultural artifacts is morally ennobling. We know, for instance, that the Nazis listened to Mahler while Jews were being marched to the ovens. Their "culture" did not seem to make them especially sensitive to the plight of their fellow man. In fact, some theorists have speculated that literary study may have the unintended effect of making people more passive and fatalistic because it encourages feelings of ambivalence (Eagleton 50).

These ideological tensions are at the heart of current questions about the role of English department studies in higher education. Should courses in literature be required? Do they provide some special benefit not enjoyed by other humanities courses? Is the ultimate goal of the English major a good job or good karma?

Obviously, the answers to these questions have enormous import for the acceptance and expansion of writing programs within English departments. In some places, those advocating utilitarian approaches have clearly maintained sway. When we asked whether offering in composition and rhetoric ought to be expanded in their departments, many of our respondents answered this way:

> Employers make hiring decisions on writing abilities; students here need all the writing courses they can get.

> Writing is so important in today's world, and the proficiency of most people is so low in the area.

> [All of our faculty] recognize the need for graduating Communication and Humanities majors with significant expertise in written and oral communication. These skills/subject matter are highly considered at a technically oriented university where major emphases are on science, engineering, technology.

In some cases, the motivation to accept such a utilitarian approach was motivated more by political pressure rather than by philosophical principle. One college remarked that their advanced writing program received a boost when a survey of former English majors revealed that they wished they had had more writing courses. Many schools indicated that student demand was high for their writing courses. In some cases the acceptance of increased emphasis on writing has been a matter of survival. One small college wrote:

> In 1980 . . . we introduced a Writing major and because we required literature courses for that major, teachers were happy. The major saved their jobs. Nowadays there may be some opposition, given that literature teachers think that the English major doesn't require enough lit. classes.

Frequently though, respondents noted that composition offerings could be expanded only if they were not considered to be at the expense of the

literature program, either in terms of student enrollment or faculty recruitment.

> There is a fair amount of resistance in our dept. to more writing courses. Opponents to writing courses feel that students are better served by traditional literacy study. It's essentially a turf war. Opponents to writing courses are afraid of losing students from their literature courses to writing courses.

Oddly enough, student demand was also used to argue against adding more offering in rhetoric and composition. In response to our question about expanding offerings, one member of the English department wrote:

> Kids [referring to the students] tend that way and we need to preserve lit. offerings, so NO.

The problems of budgets and hiring were paramount in many people's minds. Many English departments have only one or two people really trained in rhetoric and composition. The program has to get along primarily with part-time and adjunct faculty. Perhaps some of you can identify with this response.

> I was asked once to propose an [advanced writing] program for the Dept. of English. The response was fine if I could teach all the courses.

Still, the news is not all bad from Lake Wobegon. In some places, the Arnoldian hypothesis is giving way for a more embracing view of literacy. The dichotomy of literature versus composition, *theoria* versus *praxis*, *techne* versus *humanitas*, is giving way to synthesis of writing and reading as mutually supportive activities intended not merely to refine human sensibility but to enable and empower students in the academy and beyond. The writing program administrator at a large midwestern university writes:

> The writing program committee has plans to offer a university wide expository program with nine hours of expository writing, ideally one each of the first three years. There is some resistance by older faculty who still see the department as a literature dept. But we have made major commitments to Cultural Studies, Creative Writing, and Rhetoric and Composition on the grad. level so many of the new faculty see the role of the department in much broader terms.

The administrator of a technical writing program also sees a changing atmosphere toward praxis courses in the English Department:

> Eight years ago some faculty members said that increasing the requirements for [technical communication] specialists meant turning our backs on the values of the department; some charged we were "immoral" (or amoral?). Last year, they approved a new course . . . unanimously, without comment.

And finally, some departments seemed to have achieved a kind of nirvana of cooperative enterprise:

> By and large, our department has been working to erase the distinction between "writing" and "literature"; most of our writing courses rely on the intersection of writing and reading, and many of our "lit." courses are writing intensive.

> English and Writing are closely related and mutually supportive within the single department. The faculty shares commitment to process approach and integration of professional writing and creative writing experiences.

For those of you interested in putting your application at this school, I will provide the name and address for a small fee.

But even where writing has received widespread acceptance, there remain questions about how writing in an English department might differ from other programs. Some universities make a clear distinction between kinds of writing that are relevant to the mission of the English department and those that are not. The writing program administrator at a highly selective university writes:

> My department is very concerned and careful about teaching writing, yet it—and the whole university—are against "professional" programs (like journalism and technical writing). Thus, the courses must fit within "liberal arts" offerings.

A telling comment comes from another a respondent who teaches in a midwestern university:

> We have a large traditional literature faculty. They want good writing, but they don't value writing instruction. I was successful in arguing for the one writing course as part of the major by including in the requirement only courses which deal with the writing theory (the exception is creative writing—practice is OK there).

Such a comment reveals that the Arnoldian legacy of sweetness and light is still a force to be reckoned with in many departments. Creative writing, presumably in service of beauty, is acceptable. Other forms of writing may contaminate the department. Such distinctions have served to maintain the status quo within the department. The same respondent who noted that only theoretical courses on writing were acceptable in the English department, noted that they had been "able to be much more imaginative with the university-level requirements."

Many respondents found this distinction between practice and theory to be harmful to their students. One complained that theorists were undermining the introductory composition courses:

> The English department at my university is being overrun by "Cultural Theorists" and as a result the 1st year composition students are learning to deconstruct, rather than construct prose.

Another noted that English majors were graduating without sufficient writing skills:

> Few of our English majors take writing courses because they exempt the requirement on the basis of their SAT scores. These scores measure reading and vocabulary more than writing skill, so many of our students graduate without much chance to become better writers.

Still another noted that students were often prevented from pursuing their own goals as English majors:

> Students are majoring in English often in order to write. Yet our curriculum is rather traditional, and students can't get official designation as writing majors. We need to change this.

And finally, in a statement that would surely create a stir in any English department, one respondent suggests that writing should not be the *handmaid* of the department, but the *queen*:

> In my opinion, given the intensity of our Writing courses, students develop more rapidly intellectually than in our Literature courses.

As these responses indicate, English departments have reacted to changes in undergraduate writing programs in a variety of ways. some departments have begun the process of overcoming the system of "binary oppositions" that Robert Scholes has so ably described in *Textual Power*, the oppositions

between literature and non-literature, between production and consumption, and between the real world and the academy (8-9).

One possible response, as Scholes notes is simply to "let the 'law' of supply and demand work until composition replaces interpretation at the top of the heap" (6). This is an opinion I hear voiced with some frequency among my colleagues in 4C's. The image of a composition proletariat overwhelming a literary aristocracy is easily invoked. But, as in the French Revolution, we face the difficulty that we may want to depose our enemies only so that we may be more like them. In fact, many of us can recall what a dreary, atheoretical enterprise composition studies used to be. To some degree, composition studies have become interesting to the degree that they have become more like traditional literary studies—more professional, more theoretical, more dependent upon research.

The challenge we face is not simply to replace the old hegemony of literature with a new hegemony of composition, but to construct a new English department where reading and writing are mutually valued and mutually supportive activities. The achievement of this beatific vision may seem impossibly remote in some departments, but, on the whole, our survey showed movement toward a more balanced department that should ultimately best serve the needs of both students and faculty.

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